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Calfed should emphasize conservation, not subsidies

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THE CURRENT rate of water subsidies for California agriculture promotes wasteful farming practices and poor use of a valuable public resource. If the market price of water for the typical California household is $500 per year while California's agricultural corporations get the same amount for $50, according to the latest California Water Plan Update, what incentive does agriculture have to conserve or to use the state's water wisely?

The justification for ending water subsidies to the agricultural industry is basic to the state's future needs. We are not dealing with small family farms; according to the Pacific Institute in a 1995 study, in 1990 two-thirds of California agricultural production was controlled by corporations that gross more than $1 million per year. A taxpayer subsidy to these corporations only perpetuates a corporate welfare program that may have made some sense in the 1950s and 1960s when the water transfer facilities were built, but that is no longer appropriate for the current and future urbanized needs of the state.

California's agricultural corporations now consume 75 percent to 80 percent of our water in a typical year. Yet only 15 percent of agriculture's 30 million acre-feet of water used each year get the benefit of high-tech drip or micro sprinkler technology; the rest is poured out in furrow and flood irrigation. (An acre-foot of water supplies a family of four each year with enough water for inside and outside their home.)

We now have an opportunity to end these wasteful practices. It's called "Calfed," a combination of federal and state agencies set up under the pressure of federal water quality standards for the Delta.

Calfed has published a draft report on its water-use efficiency program. It does nothing to provide incentives to reduce the Central Valley Project and subsidies that are at the heart of excessive water usage by agricultural corporations. Fair market pricing of water to California agriculture corporations would certainly provide a conservation incentive. A small percentage of improvement in water conservation measures by agriculture corporations will be enough to supply California with adequate water well into the next century and to return some to their riverbeds for water quality and recreation purposes.

Major urban areas such as Monterey, San Francisco and Marin counties already have shown that 30 percent reductions through water conservation are achievable; it's now time to invest in agricultural water conservation, where the payoff is far greater with only half that improvement. That kind of reduction by agriculture would eliminate the need for additional major facilities to solve our current quality or future supply problems.

At some point, we can expect the water barons from Calfed to promote more construction alternatives with doomsday predictions of people and wildlife dying from the quality of our water and the apocalyptic prospect of not having enough to feed California's growing population. Don't buy it.

We need to remind Calfed that our tax dollars would be more wisely used if the agency avoids building any more grand facilities in the old tradition and if we force Calfed to concentrate on more economical conservation alternatives for agriculture.

But most vital of all, we need to push Calfed to eliminate water subsidies to agricultural corporations. That is at the very heart of the state's water problems.

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